

Obituary for Erwin F. Hirsch, MD, FACS

Dr. Erwin Federico Hirsch died Friday, May 23, 2008 in Rockport, Maine. Dr. Hirsch, Chief of Trauma Surgery at Boston Medical Center for the past 34 years, is remembered as a devoted husband and father, imaginative teacher, stalwart and innovative trauma surgeon, avid sailor, and dear friend.



Dr. Hirsch was born August 1, 1935 in Mannheim, Germany. The first of three sons, born at the time of Nazi occupation, he was the son of a businessman and a noblewoman. The first few years of his life were marked by his father being placed in a concentration camp, his eventual release through the efforts of his mother, and the family's resulting struggle to leave Germany. In 1939, Dr. Hirsch and his family fled Nazi Germany and safely relocated in Argentina.

During his youth in Buenos Aires, Dr. Hirsch took full advantage of every opportunity that his new life gave him. He was a good son, a resourceful older brother, and an adventurer, who among other things, at an early age did solo road trips around South America. Always an avid sportsman, he excelled at the sport of rugby and became a member of the Argentine National Rugby Team. His team was the first in Argentina's history to beat a team from their English rival. In later years, Dr. Hirsch would be one of the founders of the first rugby club in Washington, D.C.

Over the years, Erwin was involved and instrumental in the family's successful agricultural business in Argentina. Frequently in South America for medical conferences, he visited La Union, the family's ranch, where he enjoyed spending time with his family and friends riding horses and flying planes.

Dr. Hirsch discovered the medical profession at a young age. He often "operated" on animals and "injected" friends and family to make them "stronger". As a young man, he attended the University of Buenos Aires Medical School, receiving his medical degree in 1959. Upon receipt of his degree, Dr. Hirsch immigrated to the United States to begin training as a surgeon at the Washington Hospital Center. In 1966, having decided upon a career as a trauma surgeon and as an academic, he accepted a fellowship at the Clinical Shock Trauma Unit at the University of Maryland Hospital. In 1968, with the number of casualties of the Vietnam War escalating, Dr. Hirsch recognized the military's need for medical care and assistance. Although Dr. Hirsch would not receive his United State's Citizenship until after he began his tour in Vietnam, he selflessly volunteered for service in the United States Navy as a Staff Surgeon. Within a year of his enlistment, Dr. Hirsch began work at the Naval Hospital in Da Nang, Vietnam, where he quickly earned the rank of Commander and became one of only five senior general surgeons.

Dr. Hirsch's military involvement was always a priority. He remained in the Naval Reserves and returned to active service during Operation Desert Storm, serving a short time aboard the USNS Comfort in the Persian Gulf. More recently, he acted as a trauma consultant to the Navy.

In 1970, Dr. Hirsch accepted the position of Assistant Professor of Surgery at Tufts University School of Medicine and a clinical position at the Boston City Hospital. In early 1973, Dr. Hirsch was instrumental in the development of a Trauma and Critical Care Program at the Boston City Hospital and the University Hospital. In these roles, Dr. Hirsch was instrumental in implementing standardized procedures for the care of the most critically ill and injured patients.

Dr. Hirsch became the Assistant Chief of Surgery at the Boston City Hospital in 1977. With the assistance of Dr. Lenworth Jacobs, Dr. Hirsch guided the Boston City Hospital through its first trauma designation process to become a Level I trauma center. Dr. Hirsch subsequently became the Director of the Trauma Center, initially at the Boston City Hospital and then at the Boston Medical Center, a position which he held until his death. His trauma service unit was and still remains the largest in the region. Dr. Hirsch became a full Professor of Surgery at the Boston University School of Medicine in 1986. Additionally, Dr. Hirsch was the impetus behind the formation of the Boston MedFlight transport program in 1984 and he served on its Board of Directors from its inception until his untimely passing.

Throughout his career, Dr. Hirsch was a member of numerous professional organizations and was the recipient of many awards. Although his affiliations and awards were important, what mattered most to him was making the best trauma care accessible to any person that needed it. Always a voice for the underdog, and never one to turn away from a challenge, Dr. Hirsch published countless scientific articles, made frequent presentations at national and international forums, and spearheaded the development of trauma training programs in Argentina, Brazil, Chile, the Ukraine, and Bolivia.

It is befitting that Erwin's passion for the military and medicine would be the impetus for him to discover sailing, which quickly became another of his passions. He learned to sail from his lifelong friend, Dr. Frank Morse, at the China Beach recreation facility that was adjacent to the Da Nang Naval Hospital in Vietnam. His enthusiasm for sailing remained with him until his return to the United States. Erwin and his new wife, Susan, settled in Marblehead in 1971 and that afforded him the opportunity to continue sailing. A proud member of the Eastern Yacht Club, he could always be found whiling the hours away aboard his sloop, Solito, regardless of the weather or season.

Erwin is survived by his wife, Susan, of Marblehead, and his daughter, Christina Townsend and Peter Townsend of New York City and his daughter Kathleen of South Boston. He also leaves his two younger brothers, Carlos and his wife Monica of Sao Paulo, Brazil and Cristobal and his wife Lidia of Buenos Aires, Argentina, and six nephews.

For those who would like to make a donation in his name should donate to the Boston Medical Center Trauma Surgery Fund at 840 Harrison Avenue, Boston MA 02118.